



DEER PARKS IN MEDIEVAL TIMES

ARTICLE BY
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Deer management information today comes to us in a flood from many sources. We read about or discover the latest techniques to improve how we manage deer and are convinced we are pioneers in the field. However, very few people understand the ancient history of deer management that spans about 1,000 years.

Most records of early deer management begin to show up in the written record in the 11th Century after the Normans, descendants of the Vikings, invaded England and set up their own system of government. The Norman kings, and other later kings, set up “forest law” over large areas to govern how natural resources were to be used and managed in what is now the United Kingdom (Great Britain, Scotland, and Northern Ireland). Some areas were designated as “royal forests” that might contained villages and agricultural fields, but mainly provided a large protected area where privileged royalty and their friends could hunt. Since the crown owned the hunting rights, it was illegal for anyone else to hunt there unless they had specific permission from the king. Rulers sometimes allowed favored or important subjects to have limited hunting rights of their own in the royal forests.

These royal forests were not all tree-covered, but they also contained large grassy areas. The word “forest” originally didn’t describe treed landscape because it comes from the latin “foris,” which means “everything outside.” Some royal forests remain today including the Sherwood Forest in Nottinghamshire made famous by the legend of Robin Hood. The deer and their habitat in royal forests were managed by several layers of bureaucracy and a special court to deal with violators who poached a deer or cut trees for wood.

DEER PARK ESTABLISHMENT

In addition to royal forests, sometimes the king allowed knights and lords in his kingdom to create a deer park enclosed by a fence under their own management and control. Sometimes these deer parks were inside an existing royal forest and sometimes not, but they were unique areas because park holders could establish their own laws independent of the king. These “Medieval MLDPs” could only be established by



This illustration of hunting in a Medieval deer park appears in “The Master of Game.” Written in 1404, it is the earliest known book on hunting and deer management.

way of a written “license to empark” from the king. Outside the park, deer were governed by forest law but inside they were the property of the park owner.

There is evidence of deer parks established as early as 600 A.D., but it wasn’t until the Medieval Period (1085-1485) when they really proliferated. The Norman conquest of Great Britain in 1066 marked the beginning of an intense and widespread practice of deer park establishment. In 1086 there were reported to be 36 deer parks in England, but by the



early 1300s Oliver Rackham estimated there to be as many as 3,000 deer parks.

These deer parks were not large by Texas standards, ranging between 25 and 2,500 acres, but keep in mind that Great Britain is only one-third the size of the state of Texas and net wire fences weren't invented yet. Having a deer park was mostly seen as a status symbol and not a revenue generator for the owner. Parks were a visible show of wealth, power, and influence because they certainly were not profitable commercial ventures; they came with high start-up costs as it was not easy to build a deer proof fence in the Middle Ages. Many of these parks were resented by the locals because they may have included land that was previously used as communal agricultural fields for local communities. Suddenly the local residents were told they could not use that land as it was now going to be someone's private hunting ground.

The boundary fence to contain deer was called a "pale." This was most-often a ditch on the inside and barrier like a bank, wooden fence, wall of thorn bushes, stone wall, or some combination of these. Most parks were nearly round in shape to minimize boundary pale costs while enclosing as much land as possible. Often these parks contained open grassland areas called "laundes" (lawns) that provided forbs not available in the thick dark forest. Outside the pale was a cleared area 5-7 yards wide so the owner could check and repair fences as well as to catch poachers. These clear areas were also used by locals to walk around the park to their destination beyond.

In 1251, the Bishop of Winchester built a fence to enclose Witney Park with a trench 8 feet wide and 6 feet deep and a fence of freshly cut timber boards. Such constructions were so expensive, park owners sometimes traded services with hunting rights. For example, people building or maintaining the fence around a deer park might be paid by allowing them to have hunting rights within for a specific period of time.

POPULATION MANAGEMENT



This wall in Radholme Park is probably a Medieval "salter" that allowed deer to move downhill into the deer park but not able to leave. Photo by Graham Cooper.



This modern reproduction of a Medieval split-oak deer park "pale" (fence) occurs on the Charlecote Park where William Shakespeare was once accused of poaching deer. Photo by Graham Cooper.

Park keepers, gate-keepers, other officers were employed to implement the day-to-day management of the parks. These people had to live in the parks for at least part of the year in buildings and were supplied with all the equipment they needed to do their job.

Deer management was relatively sophisticated in the Middle Ages and more intensive in parks than in the royal forests. Deer were actively managed, but they were not domesticated (although records indicate orphaned fawns were allowed to suckle cows). Medieval literature discusses deer food habitats, antler development, preferred terrain, rut behavior, and fawning period. Park owners were allowed to kill predators and they apparently did at every opportunity. Predator control efforts focused primarily on wild cats, wolves, and foxes. Diseased deer carcasses were sometimes burned in place or hung from trees in an attempt to stop the spread of disease.

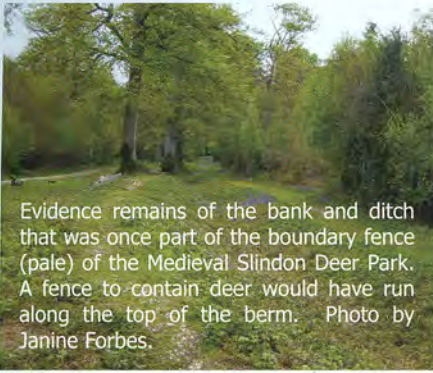
Native deer species like roe and red deer were on the decline in the late 1100s already and so fallow deer were imported as a replacement. There is some speculation that the Romans were the first to bring fallow deer hundreds of years earlier, but there is no doubt fallow deer expanded and grew in number rapidly after the Norman invasion. These nonnative fallow deer were not as hearty as native deer and needed more management to maintain their populations in the cold climate of Great Britain. Written records of deer park expenses in the mid-1100s show they built shelters for the fallow deer and put up hay for winter supplemental feeding.

As is true today, Medieval deer park owners always wanted to know how their deer herd was doing and did what they could to tally deer in their parks. Survey records exist from the royal forest of Cannock where in the year 1235 knights and forest officers were told to count the number of deer in certain sections of the forest. By the 1400s, deer surveys were being conducted in some parks in a fairly consistent fashion, including the number harvested, poached, and found dead. Park owners sometimes had to temporarily suspend hunting if deer numbers were too low.

It was not uncommon for kings or wealthy deer park owners to grant gifts of live deer to one another thereby increasing genetic diversity across the landscape and also to simply help maintain deer population abundance. These deer were



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Evidence remains of the bank and ditch that was once part of the boundary fence (pale) of the Medieval Slindon Deer Park. A fence to contain deer would have run along the top of the berm. Photo by Janine Forbes.

by stating: “Grant for the king’s special affection for Mary de Sancto Polo, countess of Pembroke, that for her life she shall have 2 deer-leaps in her park at Fodryngeye within the King’s forest of Rokyngham.”

HABITAT MANAGEMENT

It was no secret even in the Middle Ages that habitat had to be maintained and improved to maximize deer abundance. Some deer parks created areas to encourage browse growth for deer. These areas called “coppice compartments” were fenced after wood was cut so that the regrowth could recover and flourish. After woodcutting, cattle were sometimes not allowed in for 9 years and deer excluded for 6 years. Some parks permanently excluded domestic stock from areas to retain food and cover for the deer. Similar to today’s ranches, there is a clear record of such habitat work being implemented right after a personal visit by the deer park owners, indicating he had direct involvement in habitat management decisions.

Winter kill was an issue with fallow deer and so sheds (“deer houses”) were provided in some cases to protect them from the elements. Although not habitat management, records as far back as the 1100s show that hay was purchased specifically for feeding deer in winter. In 1276, King Edward I ordered one native meadow to be fenced and all brush removed so it

would grow hay for deer for winter feeding. In winter the hay was placed in special structures for deer to feed from. Although we keep developing new deer feeder designs, the concept certainly isn’t new.

Medieval deer managers also provided cut hardwood browse in winter – some only in the hardest winters and others more frequently. When wood was cut or other forest activities occurring, there was an effort to preserve the best deer habitat. King Edward III in 1350 ordered the construction of an enclosure with low places in the fence to allow deer to jump in and out, but not let cattle access it. Also, cattle were not allowed to graze in deer parks before and during the fawning period and

bracken fern could not be cut until fawns were big enough to run with their mothers. Even water distribution was planned and improved with additional pools dug in dry years.

HUNTING TECHNIQUES

There is good evidence that some kings planned “business trips” through their domain based on where and when the best hunting would be. King Edward III let it slip in 1375 that during his trip he arranged to visit Rutland forest “for sport there in the present hunting season.” Some writers stated that if it were not for hunting, the kings may never have ventured far from the main castle.

Falconry was used for



We know hunting was important to royalty because it is a widespread topic of art and literature of the time, as shown in this illustration from the 1300s. Illustration by Konrad von Sunege in Codex Manesse.





smaller game, but deer were shot with arrows, netted, and frequently chased with dogs. It was mostly bucks that were hunted to leave the breeding stock, with males hunted in June through September when they were “in grease” (fattest). It made no sense to hunt during the rut when males were amped up on Testosterone and burning fat. Females were taken in late November through mid-February.

Hunts were big elaborate affairs with many helpers and were considered a major social event. One such hunt in 1505 resulted in King Henry VII and King Philip of Spain both getting their deer with crossbows in Windsor Park. Hunting was not reserved only for men at the time. Queens and noble women were also involved, some as spectators but others as active participants in the hunt. Besides these elaborate social hunts of royalty, there were many times when employees of the deer park simply harvested deer for the owner’s use. This reminds me of my employment at the Rio Paisano Ranch where we all shot does for the main house freezer, while assisting family and paid hunters on more elaborate hunts for trophy bucks.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

Deer parks created resentment among locals who not only lost access to the forest, but may have lost active farm fields that were included in the boundary fence. This resentment drove some to poach deer in the park and required park owners to maintain an enforcement presence. Those caught poaching faced punishment that potentially included death if found guilty in the local court. As early as the 1200s, there are records of foresters claiming additional expenses because they were required to stay near the deer during fawning and rut to protect them from poaching and disturbance. Those that enforced the law occupied an intermediate position in Medieval society between the royalty they worked for and the subjects they lived among. This situation is not unlike today’s game wardens who often go to church with those they cite.

Medieval records don’t exist for wildlife violations, but there are reports of losses such as a complaint by Lord of Colton that he lost 140 deer from his park by poachers in 1378. The true story of Robin Hood

is fragmentary, but there is one thing for sure, he was not robbing bags of coins, but stealing something as valuable – venison. Legend has it that even William Shakespeare was brought before an English politician named Thomas Lucy on charges of poaching deer from his Charlecote Park.

IMPORTANCE OF DEER TO MEDIEVAL SOCIETY

Deer and deer parks had a prominent role in Medieval society. This is obvious because of the widespread appearance of deer and hunting in Medieval arts, literature and also in the time and money that kings and other aristocracy spent on hunting equipment like bows, arrows, quivers, arrow heads, knives, and hunting horns.

Venison was much more than protein, it was a way to show others they cared for them enough to present a special gift. Venison was also an important centerpiece of celebratory feasts. It was a way to show social leadership and to strengthen social connections.

By the mid-1300s, the number of new deer parks established started to decline. Although new deer parks continued to be established, by the end of the 1600s their original form and function had given away to an increased emphasis on agricultural uses of the land. Many of the original parks were “disparked” and converted to other uses.

Because deer parks were enclosed and entry prohibited, they acted to preserve landscape features such as Roman

road networks, boundaries of Medieval fields, and old settlements. They also protected many other species from overharvest and provided them with quality habitat much like large, privately-owned ranches do today. In some cases these ancient woodlands have been continually forested since the Ice Age and have contributed greatly to the conservation of biodiversity.

A surprising number of analogies can be made between these Medieval deer parks and many Texas ranches today. In both cases, deer are a priority use of the landscape and in focusing on deer, the needs of many other wildlife species are provided for. Over an amazing span of 1,000 years, we see many similarities in deer population and habitat management activities. Through it all one thing is obvious: good deer management results in the conservation of many species and their habitats for future generations.

Editors note: Jim Heffelfinger completed a Masters Degree at Texas A&M-Kingsville and then worked on the Rio Paisano Ranch (Brooks/Kleberg Co.) as Manager of Wildlife Operations. He is now an adjunct professor at University of Arizona, Professional Member of the Boone & Crockett Club, Chair of the western states Mule Deer Working Group, and a big game biologist for the Arizona Game & Fish Department. See WWW.DEERNUT.COM to purchase his book “Deer of the Southwest” published by Texas A&M University Press or follow him on Twitter: @GameTrax or Facebook: Jackrabbit Jim.



Fallow deer descending from the Medieval Period remain in parks and other properties throughout Great Britain such as these bucks in Richmond Park. Photo by Keven Law.

